

# The Clipper Visits Joseph O'Donnell

By Nancy McCafferty



Joseph O'Donnell and son, Chip.

Could you imagine preparing dinner for 200 to 1000 people? That's just what Joseph O'Donnell of Bay Rd. does almost every day. As "sous chef" and second in command of the kitchen at the Lenox Hotel in Boston, O'Donnell faced culinary challenges that would send the ordinary person into a plate-hrrowing, sauce-burning, cork-in-the-wine panic.

The Lenox is a big place. The hotel boasts a grand lining room, Delmonico's, the Old English Upper Pub and Lower Pub, numerous function rooms in addition to frequent banquets and catering to accommodate 210 guest rooms all of which are serviced from one kitchen, thereby ensuring consistency of quality. O'Donnell is flanked by 5 chefs plus a bevy of waiters and waitresses. The entire operation is overseen by Chef Anthony Scarpa, whom O'Donnell acknowledges as his teacher in planning and the efficient use of human energy. The work schedule is routinely long and varies only when its duration is extended by several hours.

One of O'Donnell's tasks is handling evening banquets - any and all evenings. Mondays are spent preparing lunches and supervising set-ups for dinner. Free weekends are non-existent as O'Donnell does the lunches, organizes preparations for the evening meal, and cooks the dinners until closing time. He reports at 6 am, Sunday to prepare the hotel's brunch. Nights are sparked with daytime activity. When the street belongs to the cop and the janitor with the mop, the people in the Lenox Hotel kitchens are preparing, baking, roasting and bustling about to satisfy their patrons. Standing at the helm in this rushing current is Joseph O'Donnell, enjoying his demanding profession to the fullest.

How and why did he choose this line of work?

Apple pie and mom. Mostly mom. Joseph's mother, Anna O'Donnell of Weymouth, loved to cook. She was one of those brave souls who forged ahead and tried her hand in the vast and confusing world of food. The family ate well, hamburgers were mentioned only in whispered distaste, and an array of culinary delights was spread before their eager eyes. Anna passed this appreciation of good food and the willingness to experiment to Joseph. He still considers her an excellent cook.

While attending Cathedral High School in Boston, O'Donnell had a part-time job at Faulkner Hospital, eventually being allowed to assist the chef there with small amounts of cooking. By the time O'Donnell was ready to graduate from high school, he had taken over a fair amount of the cooking at the hospital. The chef saw the promise and encouraged him to consider it as a career.

In 1965, Joseph enrolled in the Culinary Institute at New Haven, now in New York, for a 2-year study program, which included baking, cooking and bartending. In the summer, he worked as a fry cook on Cape Cod. "That was primitive cooking," O'Donnell recalls. "The food was quickly cooked, picked up with the hands while still sizzling, and sent to the customer. No utensils were used and my hands were calloused and continually burned." He also did a stint with the S.S. Pierce Bakery in Boston, and assisted with banquets at the Sheraton Boston. Upon graduation from the Culinary Institute, O'Donnell joined the Marine Corps, spending 1968 through 1971 as chef under the guidance of the watch captain - "General Chef." While in the service, O'Donnell witnessed the most amazing feat he claims to have ever seen. One of the other cooks was given the duty of preparing 300 pounds of pork. The fellow was apparently suffering battle fatigue because he allowed the entire 300 pounds to burn. O'Donnell was much more successful than that poor fellow. Who knows what a hungry Marine would do to you if he didn't like what was served.

Honorably discharged, O'Donnell worked at the Lenox Hotel as night chef for 4 years and took on various other details of chef de cuisine for another 2. Broadening his horizons, he went to Kingston, N.H., to work at the 1876 House, then returned to Duxbury to serve as chef at the Winsor House. There he met a local fellow, Andy Locke of Evergreen St., whose ability and hard work habits O'Donnell admired. When in 1978 O'Donnell moved back to the Lenox Hotel, he took Locke with him.

Asked to compare being a chef in a restaurant with being a chef at a hotel restaurant, O'Donnell comes down squarely on the side of hotel restaurants. "There's more action, it's far more interesting and challenging, especially the banquets. Many people who stay at the hotel are from different parts of the country and it's extremely satisfying to serve them Boston's best."

Boston's own have noticed O'Donnell's work. Hockey hero Bobby Orr sent back compliments to O'Donnell for preparing his sirloin to perfection, a relatively easy task claims the chef but Orr found it a rare enough occurrence to make note of it. Stan Makita, another hockey star, visited the Lenox and was so impressed, he returned a few days later with most of the team, minus sticks, anxious to take part in the feast O'Donnell set before them.

Soups and sauces are O'Donnell's specialties and he says there is nothing more fulfilling than to prepare a dish which he himself rates as excellent and have a diner who agrees.

He works mostly from memory, taking the best from each chef or recipe and adjusts it to his own high standards. Tasting the food while cooking is an important part of the preparation, as well as taking cues from one's own nose. The food should not only look attractive; its aroma must enhance the appetite. O'Donnell is sent a list of cookbooks on a regular basis and after examining them, may buy a book with only one recipe he intends to use. "Even if I find only one good recipe, it's well worth the price to me."

Trends in food have changed over the last decade. O'Donnell says beef used to be the selection of almost 80% of diners, but due to its current high cost and fears about cholesterol, people are experimenting with more chicken and fish. Wine with dinner has in recent years come into vogue in America.

O'Donnell recommends wine with good food and thinks some California wines have risen to an equal position with imported wines. New York wines are not far behind. But O'Donnell cautions that one should have a knowledge of wines to make an appropriate choice.

As for acquiring tastes in foods, O'Donnell adheres to the theory of repeated sampling. "You won't always like it, but never close the door on something. Try it again or switch to something else but try it." (He himself abhors rye bread.) For the average person in the kitchen he holds that one has to burn something once or twice to learn to make it correctly and that one has to be independent enough for trial and error. That's how chefs get to be great chefs.

In the maze of kitchen tools available today, O'Donnell finds the blender useful but says that food processors are needed only in making doughs for bread and the like. Microwave ovens are handy, particularly in the home of a working couple, but not really necessary. He supports the use of cast iron pots and pans as the most versatile and thick bottomed copper pans for excellent results with sauces.

Where would this chef go out to dinner? O'Donnell lists several restaurants which he considers superlative. The Lenox Hotel would be his first choice. The star chef, Scarpa, is a wonder in his work. Also in Boston are Zachary's of the Colonnade Hotel and for a taste of France, L'Espalier. Farther south is the Inn For All Seasons in Scituate. With all the enticements of advertising, O'Donnell believes the best source is by word of mouth: "People will tell you the truth about the food in restaurants and pass along the names of the best ones."

Who, might you ask, does the cooking at home? Not O'Donnell. His vivacious wife, Joanne, runs the kitchen and credits him with giving her room to establish her own hypothesis of cooking. Joanne is a life-long Duxburyite whose roots can be traced to Mayflower pioneer, John Howland. The O'Donnells have a handsome 9-month-old son named Joseph III (Chip). They enjoy most holidays together, except New Year's Eve, one of the biggest nights in the restaurant business, thanks to the Lenox owner's (Roger Saunders), kindly concern for a normal family life despite odd and long working hours.

Joseph O'Donnell is a man dedicated to his work and regards himself as fortunate to have found such a position. But it is more than mere luck. You'll discover that the next time you dine at the Lenox. While you're marvelling over the culinary pleasures, why not send back a "bravo" to Chef O'Donnell from Duxbury.